# Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Images from an Eastern Orthodox Perspective

## Summary

The claim is partly true but often overstated. Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian both attacked pagan idols, the worship of material images, and the religious manufacture of objects treated as gods; Tertullian explicitly cites the biblical prohibition against making idols, while Clement quotes the commandment against making likenesses in his attack on pagan image-worship (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, ch. 4). The better-supported formulation is that both authors rejected idolatrous images and image-worship as part of Christian separation from pagan cult, not that they clearly rejected every form of Christian visual art or what Eastern Orthodoxy later calls the veneration of icons (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

From an Eastern Orthodox perspective, the patristic evidence should be read through the distinction later articulated by St. John of Damascus and the Seventh Ecumenical Council: worship in the strict sense belongs to God alone, while honor shown to an image passes to its prototype (John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*; Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition). That Orthodox reading is historically plausible as an interpretation of anti-idolatry texts, but it is not identical to saying Clement or Tertullian already taught the full eighth-century theology of icon veneration (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council summary; Robin M. Jensen, *From Idols to Icons*).

No Wikipedia or Reddit material was used as a source for this report. Search results surfaced both Wikipedia and Reddit entries, but their claims were replaced with primary texts, academic publications, and recognized ecclesial or scholarly sources.

## Method and confidence labels

This report distinguishes three kinds of claims. **Established facts** are claims directly attested by primary texts, such as Tertullian’s explicit statement that idols are not to be made or worshipped (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*). **Widely accepted interpretations** are conclusions supported by multiple scholars or by the plain direction of the evidence,

such as the view that early Christian image discourse must be read in relation to pagan cult and idolatry rather than as a simple abstract theory of art (Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*; Robin M. Jensen, *From Idols to Icons*). **Debated or uncertain claims** are claims where the sources permit more than one responsible reading, such as whether Clement's or Tertullian's anti-idol texts should be treated as evidence against later Orthodox icon veneration (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

Direct quotations are used narrowly and should not be detached from context. For example, Clement's statement that "works of art cannot then be sacred and divine" occurs in a critique of pagan images, temples, and inert matter treated as holy, not in a standalone treatise on all possible Christian art (Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL). Similarly, Tertullian's statement that God prohibits an idol from being made as well as worshipped occurs in *On Idolatry*, a work concerned with Christian complicity in pagan cult, while *Against Marcion* clarifies that he did not treat every likeness as automatically idolatrous (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

## Key claims and evidence

| Claim | Status | Evidence | Context and limits |
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| Clement criticized pagan statues, pictures, temples, and image-worship. | Established fact | Clement says pagan religious practice used "stocks and stones, that is to say, statues and pictures," and he criticizes images and temples as inert matter rather than divine realities (Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Theoi text; Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL). | Clement's target is pagan cult and the confusion of created matter with deity. This does not automatically answer whether non-idolatrous Christian images are permitted. |

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| Clement invoked the commandment against making likenesses in an anti-idolatry context. | Established fact | In *Exhortation to the Heathen* ch. 4, Clement quotes, “thou shalt not make… the likeness of anything which is in heaven above or in the earth beneath,” in a chapter attacking pagan images and worship (Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, ch. 4). | The commandment citation is real, but the immediate context is polemic against pagan idols and divine images, not a later debate over Orthodox icons. |
| Clement taught that Christians should create no images of any kind. | Debated or uncertain | Clement permits signet-ring devices such as a dove, fish, ship, lyre, anchor, and a fisherman, while warning Christians not to engrave idol faces or morally inappropriate images (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11). | The evidence cuts against an absolute image ban. It also does not prove Clement endorsed liturgical icons, kissing icons, incense before icons, or the later conciliar theology of icon veneration. |
| Tertullian explicitly argued that idols should not be made or worshipped and cited the commandment. | Established fact | In *On Idolatry* ch. 4, Tertullian writes that “God prohibits an idol as much to be made as to be worshipped,” cites “Thou shalt make no idol,” and says the prohibition extends to likenesses in heaven, earth, and sea (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*). | This is the strongest evidence for the user’s original claim, especially for Tertullian. The key qualifier is that his wording concerns “idol” and the making of what may be unlawfully worshipped. |

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| Tertullian's position amounted to a total ban on all religious images. | Debated or uncertain | In *Against Marcion* 2.22, Tertullian says the brazen serpent and golden cherubim were not violations of the commandment because they were not made as objects of idolatrous worship (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22). | Tertullian can sound rigorist in *On Idolatry*, but his own biblical exegesis distinguishes idolatrous similitudes from divinely commanded or non-idolatrous images. |
| Clement and Tertullian used anti-image polemic to distinguish Christians from pagan idol worship. | Widely accepted interpretation | Clement frames pagan image-worship as the worship of matter rather than the living God, while Tertullian treats idol-making and idol-worship as acts that implicate Christians in pagan cult (Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL; Tertullian, *On Idolatry*). | The "distinguish from pagan idol worship" part is strongly supported, provided "images" is understood as idols or cult images rather than all visual representation. |
| Clement and Tertullian directly refute later Eastern Orthodox icons. | Debated or uncertain, leaning weak | The texts predate the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy and do not address the developed distinction between icon, prototype, veneration, and latreia formalized at Nicaea II (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*). | The texts are relevant to the debate, but they do not settle the later Orthodox-Protestant disagreement by themselves. |

## Counterarguments and Orthodox rebuttals

| Counterargument | Orthodox rebuttal | Strength and limits |
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| Clement's statement that "works of art cannot then be sacred and divine" creates a presumption against sacred Christian art. | The Orthodox rebuttal is that Clement's immediate target is pagan temples, images, and inert matter treated as divine; Nicaea II likewise does not teach that wood, paint, or stone is divine in itself, but that honor shown to the image passes to the person represented (Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL; Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition). | Strong against the claim that Clement directly refutes icons. More limited against the claim that Clement shows early Christian suspicion toward sacred visual representation. |
| Clement's permitted signet-ring images are private, symbolic, and functional, not liturgical icons. | The Orthodox rebuttal is not that Clement thereby proves later icon veneration, but that he disproves the absolute claim that all image-making is idolatrous; his distinction between permissible symbols and forbidden idol faces fits the Orthodox distinction between icon and idol (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Fr. Steven Bigham, *Christians and Images*). | Strong against a total image ban. Limited as positive proof of full Orthodox icon practice in Clement's own period. |
| Tertullian's *On Idolatry* says God forbids idols to be made as well as worshipped, so Christians should not make religious images. | The Orthodox rebuttal is that Tertullian's wording concerns idols and the making of what may be unlawfully worshipped; his own *Against Marcion* treats the brazen serpent and cherubim as non-violations because they were not made for idolatry (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22). | Strong against equating every image with an idol. Limited because Tertullian still offers no explicit endorsement of Christian icon veneration. |

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| Tertullian's biblical examples are divinely commanded exceptions and do not authorize later church-made devotional images. | The Orthodox rebuttal is that the examples still show the commandment was not understood as a flat ban on visual likenesses as such; Orthodoxy then adds an Incarnational argument for Christ's depictability, namely that the invisible God may be imaged according to the visible flesh assumed by the Son (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22; John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*). | Strong as a theological rebuttal inside Orthodox doctrine. Historically limited because the Incarnational icon argument is articulated most fully centuries after Tertullian. |
| Clement and Tertullian predate John of Damascus and Nicaea II, so later Orthodox distinctions may be doctrinal innovations. | The Orthodox rebuttal is that the Church often defines doctrine more precisely in response to controversy; the later terminology of prototype, veneration, and *latreia* can be viewed as a clarification of the older anti-idolatry principle rather than a denial of it (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council). | Strong from within Orthodox ecclesiology. Less persuasive to traditions that do not grant ecumenical councils or later doctrinal development the same authority. |
| Kissing icons, lighting candles, or offering incense looks like worship, regardless of verbal distinctions. | The Orthodox rebuttal is that Nicaea II explicitly distinguishes "honourable reverence" from the "true worship" belonging to the divine nature alone and treats reverence for icons analogously to reverence shown to the Cross, Gospel book, and other holy objects (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council). | Strong if one accepts the distinction between veneration and divine worship. The dispute remains unresolved for critics who define those outward gestures themselves as forbidden worship. |

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| Early anti-idol polemic may show a broader Christian suspicion toward sacred images, even if not a formal total ban. | The Orthodox rebuttal is that suspicion toward pagan cult images is not the same as a principled rejection of all sacred Christian images; modern scholarship increasingly treats early Christian image attitudes as complex, with anti-idol polemic coexisting with symbolic Christian visual culture and later devotional developments (Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*; Robin M. Jensen, *From Idols to Icons*). | Strong as a historical caution against overstatement. Limited because complexity does not by itself prove the legitimacy of later Orthodox practice. |

## Why this is not a fatal problem for Eastern Orthodoxy

The Clement and Tertullian evidence is not a fatal problem for Orthodoxy because the strongest primary-source claims concern idols and idolatrous worship, not a clearly defined rejection of all Christian visual representation. Clement attacks pagan images, temples, and material objects treated as divine, while also permitting certain Christian signet symbols; Tertullian condemns idols in *On Idolatry*, while also saying the bronze serpent and cherubim did not violate the commandment because they were not made for idolatry (Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL; Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

Orthodoxy can therefore accept the anti-idolatry force of Clement and Tertullian without conceding the anti-icon conclusion. The Orthodox position agrees that matter must not be worshipped as God, but it denies that every sacred image is an idol; Nicaea II explicitly says icons receive honorable reverence, not the true worship that belongs to the divine nature alone (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council).

The Orthodox answer also rests on a doctrine that Clement and Tertullian do not fully develop in these passages: the Incarnation changes the question of depictability. John of Damascus argues that the invisible God was not depicted as invisible, but after the Son became visible in flesh, Christ may be depicted according to his visible humanity; this is a later and more developed argument, but it addresses a question different from pagan idol-making (John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*).

Historically, the report's evidence supports a development model rather than a contradiction model. Jensen describes a shift from Christian attacks on polytheist cult images to Christian narrative images and holy portraits, while Finney challenges the simple theory that earliest Christianity was opposed to pictures in principle (Robin M. Jensen, *From Idols to Icons*; Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*). That development does not automatically prove Orthodoxy to a non-Orthodox reader, but it prevents Clement and Tertullian from being used as a simple historical disproof of Orthodoxy.

The strongest Orthodox conclusion is therefore modest but important: Clement and Tertullian are problems for idolatry, not necessarily for icons. They warn against worshipping created matter as divine, manufacturing idols for pagan cult, and confusing images with gods; Orthodoxy formally rejects those same errors while defending icons as relative, Incarnation-grounded, prototype-directed veneration (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*).

## Common reasoning errors in anti-icon uses of Clement and Tertullian

These are not claims that every critic of icons commits these errors. They are recurring logical risks when Clement and Tertullian are used too quickly as proof against Orthodox icons.

| Reasoning error | How it appears in anti-icon arguments | Why the Orthodox rebuttal says it fails |
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| Equivocation on "image," "idol," and "icon" | The argument treats every image as if it were an idol and then applies anti-idol texts directly to Orthodox icons. | Clement and Tertullian attack idols and idolatrous cult; Clement's signet examples and Tertullian's biblical examples show that not every image is automatically an idol (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22). |

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| Equivocation on “worship” | The argument treats every bow, kiss, candle, or incense offering as the same kind of worship owed to God alone. | Nicaea II distinguishes honorable reverence from true worship belonging to the divine nature alone, so the Orthodox position depends on a technical distinction that the argument must refute rather than ignore (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council). |
| Hasty generalization | The argument moves from “Clement and Tertullian condemn pagan images and idols” to “early Christianity condemned all Christian sacred images.” | The evidence is more mixed: Clement permits some Christian symbols, Tertullian allows biblical images not made for idolatry, and modern scholars describe early Christian image attitudes as complex rather than uniformly iconophobic (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*). |
| Anachronism | The argument reads the later Byzantine icon controversy back into Clement and Tertullian as if they were directly addressing eighth-century Orthodox icon veneration. | Clement and Tertullian predate the formal icon controversy, while Nicaea II and John of Damascus address later, more precise questions about prototype, veneration, and Incarnation (John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*; Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition). |

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| False dichotomy | The argument assumes the only options are pagan-style idol worship or no sacred images at all. | Tertullian's own biblical examples create a third category: images that are not idols because they are not objects of idolatrous worship; Orthodoxy places icons in that non-idolatrous category, though critics may dispute that placement (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22; Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition). |
| Argument from silence | The argument treats the lack of explicit second- or third-century testimony to full later icon veneration as proof that icons are illegitimate. | Silence can show that later practice was not yet fully articulated, but by itself it does not prove rejection; Finney specifically challenges the simple inference from early absence of pictures to principled iconophobia (Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*). |
| Category mistake | The argument treats Orthodox veneration as if it were directed to wood, paint, or matter as such. | The Orthodox claim is that honor passes to the prototype and that true worship belongs to God alone; disagreeing with that distinction is possible, but describing Orthodoxy as worship of paint or wood misstates the position (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*). |
| Cherry-picking | The argument quotes Tertullian's strict language from *On Idolatry* without also considering his treatment of the bronze serpent and cherubim in *Against Marcion*. | Responsible interpretation has to account for both texts, which together show a severe rejection of idols but not a simple rejection of every likeness (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22). |

## Primary-source findings

## Clement of Alexandria

Clement's polemic is strongest when he attacks pagan religious art as deceptive and as a confusion of inert matter with divine reality. In one passage, he criticizes those who build religious custom "with stocks and stones, that is to say, statues and pictures," and in another he argues that images and temples made by mechanics are inert and material, concluding that "works of art cannot then be sacred and divine" (Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Theoi text; Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL).

Clement also uses biblical commandment language against image-making in an anti-idolatry context. The Logos Library text of *Exhortation to the Heathen* ch. 4 reports Clement quoting, "For thou shalt not make… the likeness of anything which is in heaven above or in the earth beneath," in a chapter directed against the worship of images and dead matter (Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, ch. 4).

The same Clement, however, permits limited Christian use of symbolic imagery on signet rings. In *Instructor* 3.11, he allows seal devices such as a dove, fish, ship, lyre, anchor, or fisherman, while forbidding idol faces, swords, bows, drinking cups, and sexually suggestive imagery (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11). This makes it difficult to classify Clement as rejecting every Christian image in principle, even though he clearly rejects sacred pagan images and their worship.

The main counterargument is that Clement's permitted signet devices may be too limited to support later icon practice. A critic can argue that a seal ring used for household or public business is not equivalent to a liturgical icon that receives veneration, while an Orthodox reader can reply that the passage at least disproves the claim that Clement regarded all images as idols (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11).

## Tertullian

Tertullian is more explicit than Clement in connecting idol-making and the commandment. In *On Idolatry* ch. 4, he writes that "God prohibits an idol as much to be made as to be worshipped," then cites the divine law, "Thou shalt make no idol," and applies the prohibition to likenesses of things in heaven, earth, and sea (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*).

Tertullian's stricter rhetoric appears in a practical argument about Christians avoiding trades and actions connected with pagan cult. His concern is not merely private

aesthetic taste but participation in the manufacture and consecration of idols for worship (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*).

Tertullian nevertheless interprets the commandment in a way that allows biblical images not made for idolatry. In *Against Marcion* 2.22, he says the brazen serpent gave "no pretext for idolatry" and that the golden cherubim were ornamentation "remote from all condition of idolatry," so they did not violate the prohibition against likenesses (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

The main counterargument is that Tertullian's exceptions are divinely commanded Old Testament objects, not general permission for post-biblical devotional images. That counterargument weakens any attempt to use *Against Marcion* as a direct proof of Orthodox icons, but it does not erase the narrower point that Tertullian did not read the commandment as a flat ban on every visual likeness (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

## Eastern Orthodox interpretation

The Orthodox position does not deny the Second Commandment or the early Christian rejection of idols. Rather, it argues that the commandment forbids idolatrous worship of created things, not every religious image as such, and this reading is consistent with Tertullian's own distinction between forbidden idol-likenesses and the brazen serpent or cherubim (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22; Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition).

St. John of Damascus gives the classic Orthodox rationale: God was not depicted as invisible and uncircumscribed before the Incarnation, but "when God is seen clothed in flesh," Christ may be depicted according to his visible humanity (John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*). John also distinguishes the worship owed to God from the relative honor given to saints and images; some English translations use "worship" broadly, so the decisive distinction is between divine adoration and subordinate honor or veneration (John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*).

The Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 defined that icons of Christ, the Theotokos, angels, and saints should be set forth in churches, homes, and other places, and that they may receive "honourable reverence" but not the "true worship" that belongs to the divine nature alone (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition). The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese summarizes the council's decree by distinguishing *timitiki proskynisis*, or honorable veneration, from *latreia*, the worship reserved to God, and by

stating that honor shown to the icon is transmitted to the prototype (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council).

From this Orthodox perspective, Clement and Tertullian are witnesses against idolatry, not necessarily witnesses against icons. Their writings can be used to condemn worship of images as gods, but Clement's allowance of Christian signet symbols and Tertullian's defense of the cherubim and brazen serpent make them poor evidence for an absolute ban on all Christian images (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

The main counterargument to the Orthodox interpretation is that Nicaea II and John of Damascus are much later than Clement and Tertullian. A critic can argue that the later distinction between *latreia* and icon-veneration is a doctrinal development not demonstrably present in second- and third-century authors, while an Orthodox response is that doctrinal precision can develop without contradicting the earlier anti-idolatry principle (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; Fr. Steven Bigham, *Christians and Images*).

## Academic and scholarly context

Modern scholarship generally treats early Christian attitudes toward images as complex rather than uniformly iconoclastic. Paul Corby Finney's *The Invisible God* challenges the older view that early Christianity was opposed in principle and in fact to pictures, arguing that the absence of clearly Christian pictures before about A.D. 200 resulted from a complex mix of social, economic, and political factors rather than simple theological iconophobia (Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*).

Robin M. Jensen's *From Idols to Icons* traces a "dramatic shift" from attacks on polytheist cult images to Christian narrative images and holy portraits, arguing that the emergence of Christian devotion to holy images was a Christian development rather than a simple pagan relapse (University of California Press, *From Idols to Icons*; North American Patristics Society summary). Jensen's framework supports the idea that Clement and Tertullian represent an anti-idol phase, while later Christian image devotion developed through new theological and devotional conditions (University of California Press, *From Idols to Icons*).

Jonas Grethlein's Cambridge chapter on Clement's *Protrepticus* interprets Clement's attack on pagan idolatry through the ancient aesthetics of deception, noting that Clement transfers concerns about deception from poetry to pictures and makes iconic

representation's capacity for deception central to his critique of pagan viewing (Cambridge University Press, Grethlein chapter). This supports a reading of Clement as especially hostile to pagan cult images without proving that he rejected all images categorically.

Fr. Steven Bigham, writing from an Orthodox scholarly perspective, rejects the "Hostility Theory," the claim that early Christians had no images because they regarded all images as idols. He argues that Jews and early Christians could distinguish idolatrous from non-idolatrous art and that Christian artistic tradition was rooted in biblical and theological resources favorable to non-idolatrous images (Fr. Steven Bigham, *Christians and Images*).

Leslie Brubaker's work on Byzantine iconoclasm also cautions against overly simple narratives of the image controversy. Bloomsbury's description of *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* emphasizes that the debate about images between roughly 680 and 850 was more complicated than common summaries suggest, challenging assumptions about imperial initiative, systematic destruction, and a simple East-West split (Bloomsbury, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*).

Ernst Kitzinger's classic "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm" remains a major scholarly reference point for the pre-iconoclast development of image devotion. The Semantic Scholar entry identifies it as a 1954 *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* study with substantial scholarly citation, but the available page does not provide a detailed abstract, so it is best used here as a bibliographic pointer rather than as evidence for a specific claim (Semantic Scholar, Kitzinger entry).

## Major disagreements

## Orthodox versus iconoclastic or Reformed readings

Orthodox theology reads the Second Commandment as a prohibition of idolatry, not as a ban on all sacred images. This interpretation is grounded in the Incarnation, the distinction between veneration and worship, and the principle that honor paid to an image passes to the prototype (John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*; Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition).

Iconoclastic or strongly Reformed readings tend to emphasize Clement's and Tertullian's anti-image passages as evidence that early Christianity was aniconic or

iconophobic. That reading has real textual support in their attacks on idols, but it becomes weaker when it ignores Clement's permitted signet images and Tertullian's distinction between idolatrous likenesses and the biblical serpent or cherubim (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22).

## Historical continuity versus development

One disagreement concerns whether later icon veneration is continuous with early Christianity or a later innovation. Orthodox writers such as Bigham argue for continuity through a biblical and early Christian distinction between idolatrous and non-idolatrous images, while Jensen describes a real historical shift from anti-idol polemic to Christian devotional images without reducing that shift to pagan contamination (Fr. Steven Bigham, *Christians and Images*; University of California Press, *From Idols to Icons*).

Another disagreement concerns the weight of literary evidence versus material evidence. Anti-image literary texts from theologians such as Clement and Tertullian can suggest rigorism, while the emergence of Christian visual culture and the use of symbols complicate the idea that early Christians were uniformly opposed to images (Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God*; Clement, *Instructor* 3.11).

## What counts as "worship"

A major terminological disagreement concerns "worship." Nicaea II distinguishes honorable reverence or veneration from latreia, the worship proper to God alone, while many Protestant critiques argue that the outward acts of bowing, kissing, incense, or candles still constitute forbidden religious devotion to images (Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition; Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council). This disagreement is not solved by Clement and Tertullian alone because their texts mainly address pagan idol-worship, not the later technical vocabulary of icon veneration.

## Bottom-line assessment

The statement "Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian argued that Christians should not create or worship images, citing the Second Commandment to distinguish themselves from pagan idol worship" is well-supported only if "images" means idols, pagan cult images, or material representations made and treated as divine. Tertullian explicitly makes this argument, while Clement also uses commandment language and strongly

criticizes pagan images, statues, and works of art treated as sacred (Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, ch. 4).

The stronger anti-icon claim, “Clement and Tertullian prove Christians may not make or venerate icons,” is debated and comparatively weak. Clement allows symbolic Christian signet images, Tertullian permits biblical images not used idolatrously, and Orthodox theology later grounds icon veneration in the Incarnation and in the distinction between veneration and latreia (Clement, *Instructor* 3.11; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22; John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons*).

## Sources for verification

| Source type | Source | Why it matters |
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| Primary source | Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, ch. 4 | Verifies Clement’s anti-idolatry use of the commandment against making likenesses. |
| Primary source | Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, CCEL | Verifies Clement’s claim that images and temples are inert matter and that works of art cannot be sacred and divine. |
| Primary source | Clement, *Instructor* 3.11 | Verifies Clement’s permission of some symbolic signet images and his rejection of idol faces. |
| Primary source | Tertullian, *On Idolatry* | Verifies Tertullian’s explicit claim that idols are forbidden both to be made and worshipped. |
| Primary source | Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22 | Verifies Tertullian’s distinction between forbidden idolatrous likenesses and biblical images such as the serpent and cherubim. |
| Orthodox primary/theological source | John of Damascus, *In Defense of Icons* | Verifies the Incarnation-based Orthodox defense of icons and the distinction between worship and honor. |

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| Conciliar source | Second Council of Nicaea, Session VII definition | Verifies the conciliar distinction between honorable reverence and latreia. |
| Orthodox ecclesial source | Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Seventh Ecumenical Council | Provides an Orthodox summary of Nicaea II and its teaching on icons. |
| Academic source | Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God* | Challenges the simple claim that earliest Christianity was iconophobic in principle. |
| Academic source | Robin M. Jensen, *From Idols to Icons* | Traces the development from anti-idol polemic to Christian devotional images. |
| Academic source | Cambridge University Press, Grethlein on Clement's *Protrepticus* | Interprets Clement's critique of images through deception and pagan viewing. |
| Orthodox scholarly source | Fr. Steven Bigham, *Christians and Images* | Presents the Orthodox scholarly critique of the "Hostility Theory." |
| Academic source | Bloomsbury, Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* | Provides scholarly context for the complexity of Byzantine image debates. |
| Academic bibliographic source | Semantic Scholar, Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm" | Identifies a classic scholarly study on image cult before iconoclasm. |